

ADVOCACY

# Flying Beneath the Radar

*How Community Airports Quietly Power Canada*

In the remote town of Golden, B.C., the municipal airport doesn't attract much attention — unless you're a wildfire pilot, a medevac team, or a local business counting on critical air access. For those who rely on it, this small strip of unlit pavement is essential.

Across the country, airports like Golden's form the backbone of General Aviation in Canada. While they may not see daily jet traffic, Canada's 625 community airports are lifelines connecting remote regions, supporting flight training, enabling emergency response, and fueling local economies.

COPA exists to "Preserve, Promote, and Inspire General Aviation in Canada," and these airports are integral to that mission. Recognizing this, COPA commissioned the *Canadian Community Airports Profile*, a comprehensive impact study prepared by HM Aero in 2022. The report offers something unique: solid data and real-world examples to help local advocates make the case for keeping these facilities open and vibrant.

This isn't just another industry report. It's a toolkit filled with facts, figures, and success stories that show what pilots already know: these airports matter.

### 625 Airports, Thousands of Stories

So, what exactly is a "community airport"? Most are modest, municipally run facilities not part of the National Airports System. They operate with lean staffing, often through a public works department rather than dedicated aviation staff. Yet despite limited resources, they support an astonishing range of activity, from aerial crop spraying in Saskatchewan to air ambulance services in Newfoundland.

They're also critical training grounds. Of Canada's 242 flight training unit bases, 151 are located at community airports. With less congestion and lower operating costs, they're ideal places for students to learn, instructors to teach, and maintenance crews to train.

### Economic Engines in Unexpected Places

You don't need a control tower to create value. The report highlights 32 airports and their economic impact. In Peterborough, Ontario, the municipal airport supports over 500 direct jobs and contributes more than \$51 million to the GDP. Whitecourt Airport in Alberta delivers \$13.6 million in GDP and enables industrial, charter, and emergency services across the region.

Even smaller airports offer strong returns. Pembroke & Area Airport in Ontario, for instance, generates \$1.1 million in direct output, rising to \$2.1 million when you account for ripple effects in the local economy.

Beyond numbers, these airports serve people: air ambulances, firefighting crews, and search and rescue teams rely on their availability. Youth aviation camps, cadet programs, and discovery flights inspire future careers.

### What's Standing in the Way

Despite their importance, community airports face serious challenges. The report identifies five key threats:

- **Aging infrastructure:** Crumbling runways, outdated lighting, and aging hangars
- **Unstable funding:** Municipal budgets and modest user fees rarely cover costs
- **Complex regulations:** Meeting regulatory requirements takes time and expertise many community airports can't spare
- **Climate change:** From permafrost degradation to flooding, facilities must adapt
- **Land-use pressure:** Urban expansion, rezoning, and noise complaints threaten survival

As a result of these kinds of issues, in some communities, once-active airports are now shuttered or barely functional. And once an airport closes, it rarely reopens.

### Success Stories from Coast to Coast:

#### How Airports are Growing and Innovating

Yet across Canada, some community airports are not just surviving, they're thriving. The report profiles nine examples that show how local vision and collaboration can lead to growth.

In Golden, B.C., the airport's role as a wildfire base earned community buy-in and investment. Near Edmonton, Alberta, Villeneuve Airport generates over \$62 million annually by supporting flight

training, maintenance, and aviation businesses. Its long-term development plan could add 1,700 jobs and \$171 million in recurring impact through surrounding innovation and logistics hubs.

Meanwhile, St. Andrews Airport in Manitoba has become a major flight training hub through strategic planning and engagement with training providers.

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These stories highlight one concrete necessity beyond funding — alignment. Success comes when local governments, businesses, and aviation advocates share a clear, long-term vision for what the airport can be.

### What this Means for Canada's Future of Flight

Without functioning community airports, Canadian's freedom to fly is at risk. Fewer places to train, fewer emergency options, and less economic resilience are all at stake. This report isn't just for policy makers; it's for pilots, tenants, volunteers, and community members. Here's how you can use it:

- Share it with local councils, planners, or airport commissions.
- Highlight economic value - tie your airport to jobs, business growth, and tourism.
- Emphasize social impact - show how medevac access or wildfire support saves lives.
- Push for inclusion in long-term infrastructure and regional development plans.

Every airport has a story. *The Canadian Community Airports Profile* gives you the tools to tell yours, with the data, context, and credibility to back it up.

### Protect Our Community Airports

Canada's freedom to fly is rooted in the strength of its community airports. Without them, we lose not just aviation infrastructure but essential services that support public health, regional economies, and the next generation of aviators.

Your local airport is more than a strip of pavement; it's a launchpad for people, opportunities, and community resilience. Let's make sure it stays that way. ■



Download the full report at  
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